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ABSTRACT

In initiating Writing across the Curriculum (WAC) on the campus of Emory University, project directors discovered inadvertently that an eclectic approach to the use of writing in the classroom was the most effective means of engaging Emory's faculty in a positive way. In short, Emory's WAC motto has become, "if it works; use it." As a result, nearly 40 faculty members in different disciplines have developed ways of their own to work with writing in their classrooms--work that has enhanced the quality of both faculty teaching and student writing across the Emory campus. Although eclecticism has its limits, it has served Emory's WAC program well. (ARH)

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ABSTRACT
The Project at Emory University
The Importance of Being Eclectic

Rosemary M. Magee

In initiating Writing Across the Curriculum on Emory's campus, project directors have discovered the importance of being eclectic. They have found that through an open-minded, almost anything-goes attitude towards the teaching of writing to teachers of physics, economics, history, philosophy, etc. has helped keep the WAC message broad enough to appeal to all. In short, Emory's WAC motto has become, "if it works; use it." And as a result, nearly 40 faculty members have developed ways of their own to work with writing in their classrooms--work that has enhanced the quality of both faculty teaching and student writing across the Emory campus. Although eclecticism has its limits, it has served Emory's WAC program well.

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The Project at Emory University: The Importance of Being Eclectic

The Ford Foundation grant gave teachers and administrators at Emory the opportunity to become interested and gain experience in the Writing Across the Curriculum Project as a means of addressing campus-wide attitudes toward writing and the teaching of writing. Wide-spread concern about the quality of student writing on campus called for an effective means of addressing the problem. At the same time, the directors anticipated the reluctance of faculty to enroll in a program that 1) would require a commitment of precious time and 2) would attempt to instruct them in a different way of teaching what they had already been teaching for quite some time. Emory surmounted this last problem quite unexpectedly by not having certified writing specialists run the program; but, instead, teachers and administrators who, though they may have had experience teaching English composition, were learning about writing just as the others were. As a result, the directors relied on consultants to help set up and run the program: Joan Graham and Deborah Hatch at the University of Washington and Jacqueline Royster, Christine Cozzens, Joan Pettigrew and Deborah Woolley from Atlanta. Since the three directors were also learners and participants, they didn't represent a particular philosophical or pedagogical perspective. They took advantage of this arrangement by developing an <u>eclectic</u> approach to the use of writing in the classroom--though not at first intentional, an approach which proved to be a effective means of engaging Emory's faculty in a positive way.

To state the approach that evolved at Emory succinctly: if it works, use it. Don't worry about labeling an assignment as "process" or

"incremental" or "sequencing"; it doesn't matter if students plan or outline as long as they do something which helps them write. This approach affirms that different things work for different teachers and for different students. As such, it leaves open the door for many creative and, better still, committed ways of using writing in any classroom.

Faculty at Emory employed what they learned in the program's various workshops in writing-intensive courses. These courses were most often modified versions of courses previously taught, the main modification being the incorporation of more writing. As they offered their writing-intensive courses and then discussed them among themselves, the faculty became on-campus experts. The workshop sessions frequently started with two or three people talking about what they had done in their courses. Conversations turned also to general issues of pedagogy. One scientist mentioned that these sessions were the first she'd ever had with her colleagues in which they shared ideas about teaching and even techniques. Another historian talked about his miserable failure with peer review; the others in his group listened intently and then conviced him that what may have felt like a failure was in fact a success story. In general, the result of such conversations was the building of an on-campus network of writers and teachers of writing--a network that continues to serve Emory even after the consultants have returned home.

Faculty participants were asked to evaluate their courses, a task which reinforced their role as on-campus experts. Their collected evaluations included syllabi, assignments, a personal reflection and critique of the program; they also served as a text for the program, demonstrating its truly eclectic nature.

The biggest breakthrough for Emory faculty, collectively and individually, occurred when they realized that offering writing-intensive courses did not mean requiring longer or more papers as much as taking a different approach to writing and that writing-intensive courses did not require that there would always be increased grading of papers. In fact, they found that more often than not there was increased planning, more carefully designed assignments. Having students write more did not mean that everything they wrote had to be carefully evaluated by the teacher. Journals, peer review, sequencing assignments, short in-class writing assignments all could make the class more writing intensive and not more labor intensive for the teacher.

There are certain drawbacks to eclecticism. It means the directors of the program at Emory could not always be as practical as they wished. Sometimes colleagues begged for specific techniques: how to do an assignment; when to use journals; how to grade papers. Eclecticism means frequently saying: well you can <u>try</u> this; so and so did this, why not call her? To someone trained in a particular school about rhetoric and writing this looseness may present a problem; those who firmly believe that some ways of teaching are superior to others my feel uneasy. However, as a result of Emory's effort, a core group of Emory's faculty now says that writing is important, that they want to help students be better writers, and that writing may in fact expedite and deepen the process of learning physics as well as philosophy, economics as well as English. More importantly, a tremendous amount of goodwill and even occasional enthusiasm allows writing to occur more meaningfully in classes all across Emory University.